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Urban Agriculture

by Elizabeth Mylott

A movement to increase the protection offered to agricultural land within the Portland Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) has many rethinking the place of agricultural land within urban space. Urbanization and agriculture have historically been viewed as mutually exclusive land uses. As urban areas grow, they expand outward, overtaking agricultural land. At the same time, decreases in agricultural jobs feed urbanization. Agriculture and urbanization do not exist in the same spaces. However, in the Portland Metropolitan region, this pattern of land use specialization does not hold true. And, within a six county area where agriculture can act as more of a connector of urban and rural residents than a divider, many people don't think it should.

Since the late 1970s, the use of land in Oregon has been defined by its relationship to the Urban Growth Boundary (UGB). The UGB was instituted during the late 1970s as part of larger land use reforms intended to shape future development, encouraging urban growth while protecting forest and farm land against urban sprawl. Dense development and redevelopment are encouraged within the urban core, strengthening a traditional urban settlement pattern around a strong downtown. Inside the UGB, land is to be used for the highest urban purpose. With housing and non-agricultural commercial development concentrated within, the land outside the UGB is protected from development pressures; natural resources and agriculture lands are free to flourish. This is the vision behind the UGB, but a closer look at the land use in the Metro region reveals a different land use pattern.

Agriculture is one of the top industries in Oregon. With 225 different crops the state is behind only California and Florida in the number of commercial crops produced. During the past 30 years, Oregon has seen an increase in the number of small and medium-sized farms. Agriculture sales have steadily been on the rise in the Portland Metropolitan region. In 2005, the area's agriculture sector generated more than \$1 billion in sales, a 2% increase from the year before and an impressive 13% increase from 2000. Not only are sales increasing, but they are increasing faster

in the metro region than in other parts of the state and have been for 25 years. Specialty products, including nurseries, greenhouses and Christmas trees, are the area's top commodity group. In 2005, the region's specialty products sales reached \$645.6 million, accounting for half of the statewide total sales. Three of the five Oregon counties in the region are among the top five counties in the state in terms of agricultural production. Multnomah, the most urban county in the state, ranks fourteenth in terms of agricultural production. The location of the Metro region in the lush Willamette Valley is partially responsible for the strong agricultural output, but this alone cannot explain the increase in farming. Local culture also plays a role.

Support for local markets and commitment to food are core area values. Portland and the surrounding counties are ripe with farmers' markets, farm stands, Community Supported Agriculture, and restaurants that buy exclusively from local producers. Portlanders have a heightened connection to their food. An increase in agriculture within the urban growth boundary would allow for an increase in local production.

Proponents of urban agriculture have long argued that food production within cities helps to support small farmers, strengthens the connection between people and their food, and increases greenspace. Urban agricultural programs have been used to teach school children about nutrition, to establish an economic base for immigrants, and to increase healthy food available to low-income residents. If protection of agricultural land is strengthened and the sector continues to grow, the region might serve as a blueprint for other areas looking for a more organic connection to their food.

But if agriculture occurs within the urban growth boundary, then what is to happen outside the urban growth boundary? Will rural land be developed outside the urban growth boundary while land within the boundary is turned into farms? Some argue that increasing agricultural land within the UGB threatens the integrity of the UGB and inflates UGB land prices while increasing development pressures outside its boundaries.



\$600,000,000

\$500,000,000

\$400,000,000

\$300,000,000

\$200,000,000

\$100,000,000

\$0

County Gross Farm and Ranch Sales, 2005



Source: Oregon Department of Agriculture

Photographs above are courtesy of Gaining Ground Farm and Dancing Roots Farm.